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On the taxonomy of the western Mediterranean islands populations of Subalpine Warbler *Sylvia cantillans*

by Gabriel Gargallo

Received 19 January 1993

The Subalpine Warbler *Sylvia cantillans* is a common breeding species in the Mediterranean Basin. Its European range extends from the Iberian Peninsula through southern France, most of Italy (including Sicily), coastal former Yugoslavia, Albania, southern Bulgaria and Greece to western Turkey; and from Morocco to Tunisia in North Africa (Peters 1986, Cramp 1992). The breeding range also includes the islands of Corsica, Sardinia, and Majorca and Cabrera in the Balearic Islands (Thibault 1983, Cramp 1992, Gargallo 1993). Three subspecies have been recognized: nominate *cantillans* in southwestern Europe from Italy westwards, including the western Mediterranean islands; *albistriata* from the former Yugoslavia eastwards; and *inornata* in North Africa (Vaurie 1959, Williamson 1976, Peters 1986).

There are no or only very slight subspecific differences in female plumage (Williamson 1976). Males, however, in spring plumage show distinctive features (Williamson 1976, Cramp 1992, Svensson 1992): the race *albistriata* differs from nominate *cantillans* and *inornata* by having a broader white moustachial streak, slightly darker upperparts, and a more chestnut-brown, less orange, throat and breast clearly demarcated from the more pure white belly and less coloured sides of belly and flanks; nominate *cantillans* has a reddish-orange (or pinkish-chestnut) colouration on the underparts extending farther down and to the sides, unlike *albistriata*; *inornata* differs from *cantillans* by having purer orange-coloured underparts.

We studied Subalpine Warblers during the spring and summer of 1992 on Illa de l'aire (Minorca), Cabrera and Majorca. We made field observations both on migrating birds and on several pairs breeding on Cabrera and at Cuber, Majorca; 49 birds were examined in the hand. In addition the plumage characters of different populations of Subalpine Warbler were examined at the British Museum (Natural History), Tring, and at the Museo Nacional de Ciencias Naturales, Madrid. Direct observations on the nominate race, *cantillans*, have been made routinely during the last few years in the Iberian Peninsula, and *albistriata* was studied in April 1992 at several localities in Greece.

While studying Subalpine Warblers in the Balearics, we found that all the males that we mist-netted or observed had clear light brownish-pink underparts without any or with very little orange or chestnut tinge, being thus very distinct from any other known race. Moreover, the call notes of these birds also differed strikingly from typical Subalpine Warblers, closely resembling the common call of the Wren *Troglodytes Troglodytes* and more slightly that of the Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*. This call was also uttered by females and juveniles, and was apparently a distinctive vocal feature of these populations.

This characteristic call has been also described for Corsican and Sardinian populations (Lemaire 1973, Bergmann 1976, Cody & Walter 1976, Thibault 1983). Moreover, Orlando (1937) described a new race of Subalpine Warbler from Sardinia, not accepted as such and included in nominate *cantillans* by subsequent authors (Vaurie 1959, Peters 1986, Williamson 1976), as having a dull rusty brown (*rugGINE-sudicio*) instead of the typical reddish-chestnut or chestnut (*rosso-canella*, *rosso-castagno* or *castagno*) underparts. The type has not been located and so comparison is not possible; but although the meaning of any particular colour is very subjective and varies greatly from one observer to another, we think that the description of "dull rusty brown" underparts of Orlando's race refers to the same colour that we found in the Balearic Islands; moreover it is supported by the fact that the single adult male collected in the breeding season from Sardinia (there are no Corsican birds) in the skin collection of the BMNH has the same distinctive plumage features of Balearic populations.

In view of these resemblances in plumage colouration and vocal characteristics among the western Mediterranean island populations, and their distinctiveness from all other races, we propose that *Sylvia cantillans moltonii* Orlando, 1937, should be recognized as a valid subspecies.

Comparison of *S. c. moltonii* with other races

Biometry

Table 1 summarizes some biometrical characters measured on live birds of the different races of Subalpine Warbler. There is no information on the race *inornata*.

Subspecies *moltonii*, like *cantillans*, is clearly smaller than *albistriata*. Wing, tarsus and bill (from skull) measurements are significantly

TABLE 1

Mean values, standard deviations and range for four biometrical traits measured in three races of Subalpine Warbler (sexes combined, in mm)

	<i>n</i>	mean	s.d.	range	<i>n</i>	mean	s.d.	range
		wing				tail		
<i>moltonii</i>	29	60.1	1.09	57-63	26	53.4	1.54	49.5-57
<i>cantillans</i>	94	58.7	1.20	55.5-63.5	100	55.2	1.80	52-60
<i>albistriata</i>	11	62.5	1.24	60-64.5	11	55.1	1.45	52-57
		bill				tarsus		
<i>moltonii</i>	27	12.9	0.38	12.3-13.6	27	18.4	0.54	16.8-19.4
<i>cantillans</i>	92	12.9	0.43	11.6-14.0	93	18.6	0.49	17-20.9
<i>albistriata</i>	11	14.2	0.44	13.3-14.9	11	19.2	0.47	18.2-20.0

greater in *albistriata* (T-test: $t=4.97$, $t=7.23$ and $t=22.37$ respectively; $P<0.01$); there are no significant differences in tail length (T-test: $t=1.94$; $P>0.05$). Nominate *cantillans* has a shorter wing and longer tail than *moltonii* (both differences significant, T-test, $t=4.66$, $t=2.69$; $P<0.01$), but bill and tarsus lengths are similar (Table 1).

Published measurements of *cantillans* and *albistriata* (Williamson 1976, Cramp 1992) also support the size differences between these races. The differences in wing length that we have found between *cantillans* and *moltonii* may be the result of comparing birds of the race *cantillans* from a quite restricted area (mainly northeastern Iberian Peninsula); the wing length measurements given by Cramp (1992) for *cantillans* are very close to *moltonii*. The measurements of *inornata* given in Cramp (1992) are close to both *moltonii* and *cantillans*.

Plumage

In spring plumage, adult males of *moltonii* differ clearly from the other subspecies by having light brownish pink underparts instead of reddish-orange as in *cantillans*, more pure orange as in *inornata*, or chestnut as in *albistriata*. This colour extends, as in *cantillans* and *inornata*, to the sides of the belly and flanks, differing from the more restricted chestnut tinge of typical *albistriata*. Upperparts are paler grey than in *albistriata*, and slightly paler than in *cantillans* and *inornata*. The moustachial streak is rather thin, white in colour, sometimes with a slight pinkish tinge, not so conspicuous as in *cantillans* and much less than in *albistriata*. Females and juveniles seem inseparable from the other races.

After the postnuptial moult, the colouration of the underparts of males is greatly modified; the feathers of throat and breast have broad whitish tips and the pinkish colouration is very restricted, so that the subspecific features are less apparent in the field, though not in the hand.

Vocalizations

There are clear and distinctive differences in the usual contact-alarm calls of the races *moltonii*, *cantillans* and *albistriata* (Lemaire 1973,

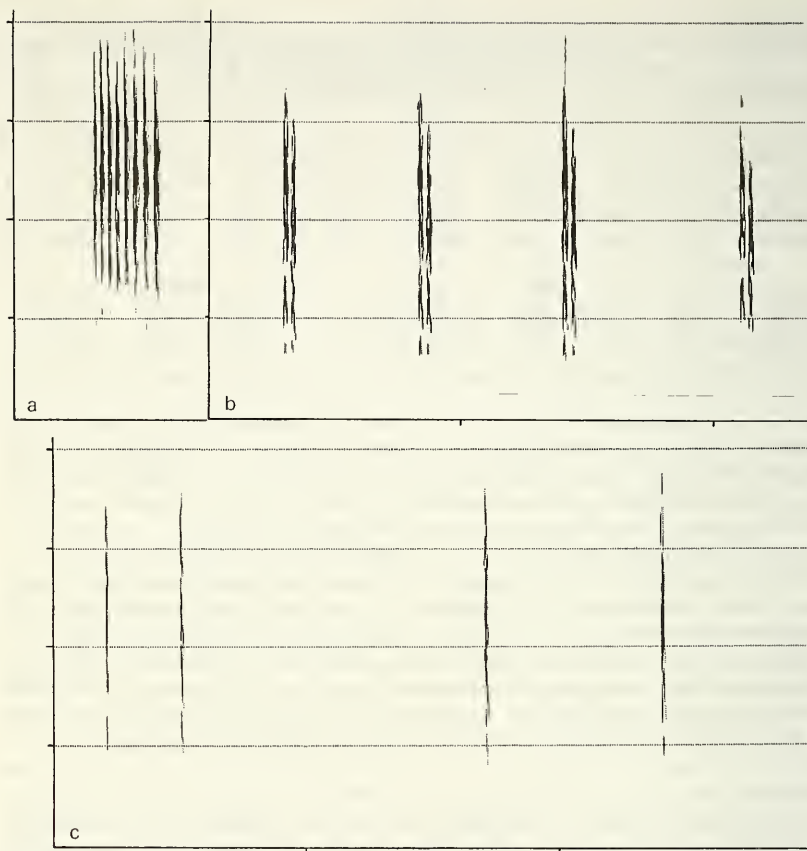


Figure 1. Sonagrams illustrating the differences in vocalizations between *moltonii*, *cantillans* and *albistriata*. Horizontal scale gives time in seconds; vertical scale 0–8 kHz. (a) *moltonii*. Recording by Gabriel Gargallo, Cabrera, Balearics, Spain, May 1992. (b) *albistriata*. Recording by Gabriel Gargallo, Brallos, Fokis, Greece, April 1992. (c) *cantillans*. Recording by José Luis Romero, La Roca, Barcelona, Spain, June 1991.

Bergmann 1976, Cramp 1992, *pers. obs.*; Fig. 1). Available recordings from northwestern Africa in the British Library of Wildlife Sounds (London) and those published in Cramp (1992) indicate that the call of *inornata* is similar to that of *cantillans*.

The call of *moltonii* (Fig. 1a) is a rather hard rattling *trrrrt* reminiscent of the typical call of the Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*; it is a short strophe, 0.2–0.5 sec long, usually composed of 8–9 elements.

The call of *cantillans/inornata* (Fig. 1c) consists of a single short element, *tek*, usually continuously repeated at variable intervals according to the behavioural context.

The call of *albistriata* (Fig. 1b) consists of two elements *trek*, usually uttered in pairs or continuously when the bird is excited.

Calls that sound similar to *moltonii* have been found in Portugal and South Greece (H. Shirihi in *litt.*); however we, as Bergmann (1976), have never heard this call outside the range of *moltonii*. Rarely a *cantillans*-like *tek* may be uttered by *albistriata*, but always as part of the song or in a series of *trek-trek* notes.

Concluding remarks

In the present state of knowledge the breeding distribution of *moltonii* includes some of the Balearic Islands (Majorca and Cabrera), Sardinia and Corsica. Corsican populations are included since they have the same distinctive call, but we have not examined birds from this island for plumage features. Hence, the distribution of this subspecies seems to be restricted to some western Mediterranean islands. However, after checking the skin collection at the BMNH (Tring) we found two males of the race *moltonii* that had been collected from Tunisia and three from northwestern Italy. These birds, all collected in spring, might have been migrants passing through Tunisia or birds which had, accidentally, flown over Corsica. But we cannot completely reject the possibility that *moltonii* may breed in Tunisia and northwestern Italy. In fact we have not found any male of the race *inornata* among the specimens collected in Tunisia, neither at the BMNH (Tring), where there are only the two males above-mentioned, nor at the MNCN (Madrid) where the single specimen is a male of the race *moltonii* collected in May. Clearly we need more information to delineate a more precise distribution. Nevertheless, an island origin for this race seems probable, where isolation and insular ecological conditions could have allowed such a clear differentiation from the closely adjacent continental populations, both European and African. Some spread to limited parts of the mainland might have taken place subsequently.

Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to Philiak Akriotis, Santi Cachot, Raúl Escandell, Pere Garcies, Jaume Jaume, Pere Tomàs and members of the GOB for their hospitality and help during my work in Greece and the Balearics. I am very indebted to Jon King who kindly arranged my visit to England and to Peter R. Colston at the British Museum (Natural History), Tring, and Josefina Barreiros at the Museo de Ciencias Naturales, Madrid, for allowing me to check the skins in their respective institutions. My thanks to Richard Ranft at the British Library of Wildlife Sounds and José Luis Romero for supplying recordings, to H. Shirihi, and D. W. Snow who made helpful suggestions for improvements. The Department of Catalan Phylogeny at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona kindly provided computer facilities for sonographic analysis.

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A *Haplospiza* finch in western México; the lessons of an enigma

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Received 20 January 1993

Haplospiza is a small, mainly South American genus generally assigned to Emberizinae (if that subfamily is really distinct from *Fringilla*). One of these obscurely coloured, rather small finches, *H. unicolor* (supposedly monotypic), ranges from eastern Brazil south to northeasternmost Argentina, etc. The other, *H. (Spodiornis) rustica*, is the more northern (and western) species. It inhabits the Andes, east to Venezuela, reappearing (disjunctly and very locally) from western Panamá north and west to southernmost México near the Guatemalan border, with one old report farther north. Here it is notoriously difficult to find; the 3 El Salvador specimens "suggest that the species is at best a rare resident of the northern cordillera, and possibly no more than a vagrant" (Thurber *et al.* 1987). But no known population could yield such vagrants: in Honduras it is known from 2 specimens, from one locality (Monroe 1968); in Nicaragua from 1 (Martínez-Sánchez 1989); while it remains unreported from Guatemala (Land 1970). The "irregular, perhaps nomadic, seasonal movements" in Costa Rica (Stiles & Skutch 1989) surely do not reach or cross the Nicaraguan lowlands. Even in Costa Rica it is "Rare or very local", and it was never found there in the explorations of Carriker or of Slud (1964). There are hardly any accounts of its being seen in any numbers (Stiles & Hespenheide 1972). Wetmore *et al.* (1984: 582) aptly conclude: "Almost nothing is known of this species."

Well north of the Guatemalan border, there has long been an enigmatic record: the type of *H. r. uniformis* Sclater & Salvin, taken by R. Montes de Oca, supposedly at Xalapa, Veracruz. But Chapman (1898: 17) found that Montes de Oca's "Jalapa" meant little more than the state of Veracruz. Even this seemed rather dubious; no one else ever